

# PASTA NEWSLETTER

## # 52 - February 2007

PASTA is the acronym of the Professional Association of Student Representative Council Teacher/Advisors. Founded in New South Wales, Australia, in February 1995, our Association exists to support in whatever ways possible those who work with and support programs of student participation, representation and leadership.



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## PASS THE PASTA

How many times have members of your Student Council been concerned because they have to make a choice between what they think is what is expected of them as an SRC member and what they think that they should do to remain part of their peer group? How many times have they decided that it's more important to be popular than to do the right thing? If they discuss it with you as their adviser, what do you say to them? How do you help them make a conscious decision?

Perhaps the following from the January newsletter of the Canadian Association of Student Activity Advisers (CASAA) may help. It may even be worth getting copied and placed in your meeting area or even giving to each SRC member.

"Just because an idea or way of doing things is popular, doesn't mean it's right for everyone. However, part of the way that something becomes popular is that many of us don't take the time to determine what's right for us; we simply do what most of the people we know are doing. In this way, our decisions about life are made by default, which means they aren't what we call conscious decisions. There may be many other options available, but we don't always take the time to explore them.

This may be the result of feeling overwhelmed or pressured by family, peers, and humanity at large, to do things their way, the way things have always been done. Regardless of the cause, it is important

that, as often as we can, we decide for ourselves what to do with our lives rather than just drift along on the current of popular opinion.



It is not always easy to make decisions that go against the grain. Many people feel threatened when those close to them make choices divergent from the ones they are making. Parents and grandparents may be confused and defensive when we choose to raise our children differently from the way they raised us. Friends may feel abandoned if we decide to change our habits or behaviour. Meanwhile, on our side of the fence, it's easy to feel frustrated and defensive when we feel unsupported and misunderstood simply because we are thinking for ourselves. It can be

exhausting to have to explain and re-explain our points of view and our reasons.

This is where gentleness, openness, and tolerance come into play. It helps if we are calmly persistent, consistent, and clear as we communicate to those around us why we are making the choices we are making. At the same time, we have the right to say that we are tired of talking about it and simply need our choices to be respected."

As we start the new year it is helpful to remember that we ask a lot of these students. Some support from us when they face these sorts of moral dilemmas can go a long way to help them do a better job.

**Ken Page**  
*PASTA President*

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<http://hsc.csu.edu.au/pta/pasta/>

# Civic and Moral Education in Japanese Public Schools

*As part of our educational experiences on the 2005 Leadership tour, we were invited by adviser **Sandra Scribner** to visit her school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. As well as organising our stay, she was also busy preparing for her upcoming study experience in Japan. The following article gives us her insights into the differences in civics education between Japanese and American schools and could also be relevant to those who are trying to implement the Civics and Citizenship Education course in New South Wales schools.*

As a member of the October 2005 Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund (JFMF) Teacher Program, I had the opportunity to observe, ask questions about, and study the Japanese education system. Originally my plan was to study their student government structure especially as it relates to community service and civics training; however, as I became involved in this study I soon realised that their civics training extends far beyond co-curricular activity. The Japanese strive to educate the whole child by incorporating 'moral' education at the elementary and lower secondary level and 'civic' education at the upper secondary level. To understand this, first we need to look at the differences between our system and theirs.

The Japanese Education System is centralised with a national course of study for each level, elementary (K-6), lower secondary (grades 7-9) and upper secondary (grades 10-12). The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture or *Monbusho* as they call it, sets the guidelines to which all Japanese schools must adhere.

This course of study was reformed in 1992-93 with its main aim to equip all students with the basic fundamentals needed for citizenship. By the adherence to national standards and the use of authorised textbooks, the students throughout Japan reach their educational objectives no matter which region they are from and the educational opportunities inherent there.

As a result of this policy, well over 95% of Japanese are literate and graduate from high school, compared to the US graduation rate of 88%. They estimate that the average Japanese high school graduate has attained about the same level of education as the average American after completing two years of college. But there is much more that is different. They are not afraid to provide moral and civic education.

Their course of study booklet consists of educational goals for students' learning at all grade levels, for every subject as well as directions for the teachers on the effective design of units of curriculum. In particular the general provisions state:

*Each school must ensure that all of its educational activities contain a moral education component. In addition to a period dedicated*

*to moral education, the school also provides moral educational teaching in each class that is appropriate for each subject, special activity or the period for integrated study.*

Moral education is based on the fundamental spirit of education set out in the Fundamental Law of Education and the School Education Law. Its purpose is to foster a sense of morals that provide a platform from which students can develop as future-shaping Japanese full of initiative, who not only possess the spirit of respecting fellow humans and show reverence towards life, which they demonstrate daily in their lives at home, school and in society at large, but who also possess a rich spirit, contribute to creating a culture rich in individualism, advance the democratic nature of the society and the country, and contribute to a peaceful international society ... Moreover, families and the local community should be involved and students should be given opportunity to develop their inner sense of morals by providing them with rich experiences such as volunteer work.

Since the Japanese educational system lays emphasis on cooperative behavior, group discipline, and conformity to standards, it has served the country well in producing the skilled industrial workforce that made Japan an economic global power house in the 20th century. Over the last several decades however, there has been a growing dissatisfaction with a system that has focused too much on conformity and the rote memorisation required to advance. Highly competitive tests are given to get into the best high schools (which are non-compulsory), and colleges put tremendous emphasis on testing of facts and basic knowledge. Some students even attend cram schools or *jukus* after school to acquire a competitive edge. Up until recently, a six day school week was very normal with a half day on Saturday. This, coupled with the fact that they attend approximately six more weeks of classes per year than do their counterparts in the US, makes them supposedly better prepared to join the workforce or attend a university.

Their moral and civic education in Japan is not equated with religious morals. Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity all coexist without any one having more power over the other. A popular term there is 'morality',

which encompasses all values that a person holds and all behaviors that impact on others. This seems to include even adherence to institutional rules such as dress code, hallway behavior, and the manner in which teachers and adults are greeted and shown respect.

In Japan, civic responsibility and service learning start at a young age with tasks in their own schools like serving lunch from carts of food delivered to each classroom, cleaning and stacking the dishes, and cleaning the school. Everyone recycles and participates in the maintenance of the school grounds and gardens. Thus, pride is established in early elementary and continued on through upper secondary. I was amazed at the sense of community that the students demonstrated within their schools. Student Councils seemed to spearhead and organise most of these activities even though everyone took part.

Numerous activities are co-curricular, and there is time built into the daily academic schedule for students to pursue their favorite activity. This gives Student Council a planned time and place to meet with school administrative support. Student Council members study concepts fundamental to an understanding of politics and government such as authority, privacy, responsibility, and justice. The Japanese political system is based on the British parliamentary system. Leadership is viewed in a slightly different manner as a result. Their Student Council structure is modeled on this system as well.

What can we learn from the Japanese when it comes to moral and civic education? Well, the problem of universality and cultural relativism is evident. How do we determine the difference between teaching morals and values? Some will argue that they equate them with religious values or morals. Since our system was based on the separation of church and state, can we as a religiously and ethnically diverse society, determine what are the moral or civic values necessary in a democratic society that will enable all to become enlightened, informed participants? According to former president Jimmy Carter, in his new book *Our Endangered Values*, there has been a "disturbing societal trend ... religious and political worlds have become intertwined" to a point that the electorate is voting based on religious viewpoints. Two examples of expert committees trying to come to grips with these issues are the Josephson Institute's 1992 Youth Summit Conference in the United States and the 1996 National Forum for Values in Education and the Community in the United Kingdom. The Youth Summit's result was a set of six values that have become known as the Six Pillars of Character: Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, and Citizenship.

The British Forum for Values in Education and the Community concentrated on four domains: Society, which includes truth, human rights, and law; Relationships, which includes others; The Self, each person is a unique individual with intrinsic value; The Environment, which maintains that each individual

work towards a sustainable environment for the future. Participants in the forum could reach consensus on these values, but not the source of the values or how to apply them.

Student Councils in the United States have their work cut out for them. How do they help develop enlightened participation in a political system when many of our youths are disaffected with what they see on the news or read about in their local papers? Recent opinion polls and scholarly studies have produced evidence of apathy, alienation, cynicism, anger, and frustration about our government. According to Daniel Yankelovich, chairman of Public Agenda, this foul mood is characterised by three trends: the lopsided character of economic growth in which the majority of Americans are failing to participate; the weakening of shared core values; and a serious disconnect between America's leaders and the citizenry.

According to an article in the January 1996 *Washington Post*: "The Politics of Mistrust", this can be explained by looking at the knowledge gap; people just don't know much about politics, nor do they care. Along with a steady decline of trust came an increase in cynicism. This has big implications for education: knowledge is important. Without the basic facts about our political system, too many Americans tune out politics and turn off to voting.

Samuel Popkins, political scientist at the University of California in San Diego claims that Americans know about as much about politics now as they did in the 1940s, despite the fact that we go to school longer now than they did 60 years ago when the average was only nine years. Thus many Americans are confused by politics because they simply don't know enough basic facts to follow today's political debates. Our schools should be working to solve this! What better way than through application and simulation?

Student Councils can help by working with their school administration to do a number of things. First, provide time for students to participate in student activities focused on civic life. They also should provide a forum for discussion on current events at all levels from local to international and in particular those that students see as important to them. Formal civic instruction needs to be linked to performing community service, thus providing students meaningful experiences in working on serious matters of public policy. Through student government they should take part in simulations of democratic processes and have a meaningful voice in the management of their own classrooms. Maybe we can take a page from the Japanese system and bring civics not only into the classroom, but into society as well.

**Sandra Scribner**

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The *PASTA Newsletter* is edited by Ken Page and distributed bi-monthly as a supplement to *Connect* magazine.